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SIPDIS

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STATE PASS TO USAID FOR DCHA/OTI-RPORTER
NSC FOR SHANNON AND BARTON
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH VICE PRESIDENT RANGEL

Classified By: AMB. CHARLES S. SHAPIRO. REASONS 1.5(B) AND (D).

Summary

11. (C) On June 16, the Ambassador met with GOV Executive Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel. Rangel stated that Chavez and his supporters would accept the results of any referendum and would act as a democratic opposition if they lost. He said that the integrity of Venezuela's electoral institutions has been proven by events and challenged the opposition to commit in advance to accepting the results of a referendum if it loses. The Ambassador stressed the importance of international observers to maintaining confidence in the electoral process; Rangel said that observers would be permitted but their presence would need to be "regulated" appropriately. He asserted that Chavez's supporters were "galvanized" for the coming referendum while the opposition was in disarray. He called for rebuilding the U.S.-Venezuelan bilateral relationship, highlighting excellent counter-narcotics cooperation. The Ambassador said that, if, as has been discussed on a preliminary basis, Rangel's chief of staff visits Washington, he will be received appropriately. However, he stressed, Chavez's personal attacks on President Bush have had a very negative effect. End summary.

Referendum On Track

12. (C) On June 16, the Ambassador, accompanied by A/DCM, met with GOV Executive Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel, who was accompanied by chief of staff Amb. Rene Arreaza. Rangel led off by offering President Chavez's greetings and best wishes for the Ambassador and his family. The Ambassador thanked him and said that he now expected to remain in Venezuela through the August 15 recall referendum. He noted that President Chavez was now describing the referendum as "an achievement of the revolution" since it was enshrined in the Bolivarian Republic's constitution.

13. (C) Rangel said that he looked forward to winning the "ratification" of Chavez's tenure in office, and that he hoped that following the victory, the opposition would accept the results. If the opposition won, the current government would form a democratic opposition. "For fifty years, we were in opposition; we know how to do it," he asserted, adding that the opposition, to judge by its behavior, did not know how to behave when it was out of power in a democracy. Rangel added that he wanted the opposition to state publicly that it would accept the results of the referendum, win or lose, but it had refused to do so thus far. He would like to see a joint ceremony between the opposition and the government accepting the process's legitimacy.

Observers OK, But Must be Regulated

14. (C) The Ambassador responded that the possibility of alternation in power was essential to democracy, and established in the Bolivarian constitution. The USG had made clear, including in statements from the Secretary, that it would accept the results of a fair and transparent process. However, the fact was that there was a great deal of skepticism on the opposition's part regarding the conduct of electoral institutions; for that reason international observers were crucial to maintaining a credible process. The Ambassador of the European Union had told him that the EU had a mandate to send up to 140 observers to Venezuela once it had received an invitation. In response to Rangel's suggestion of a joint ceremony with the opposition blessing the electoral process, the Ambassador asked if there was any dialogue going on. Rangel answered negatively, making clear that opposition acceptance beforehand of whatever outcome the referendum process produced was the pre-condition of any such

dialogue. The GOV, he added, has been "snakebitten" by undemocratic opposition conduct in the past and is not going to talk to it without such a commitment on its part.

(Comment: The opposition has no reason to approve the conduct of the National Electoral Council ahead of time, and is not going to do so. End comment.)

15. (C) Rangel stated that the legitimacy of Venezuela's National Electoral Council had been validated by the successful conduct of the recall referendum and "reparo" process. Observers would, he went on, be invited to the referendum; however, their presence needs to be "regulated" so that they are there as observers and not "protagonists." He said that the National Electoral Council, not the GOV itself, would decide on such regulations; it was looking at how observation is structured in other Latin American countries such as Mexico.

Campaign Going Great

16. (C) Asked how he saw Chavez's effort to win the referendum going, Rangel said that the President's supporters were thoroughly "galvanized," as shown by a recent massive rally. The opposition ("which is convinced that he is a dictator") was caught off-guard by his acceptance of the referendum. While leadership of the pro-Chavez "Comando Maisanta" campaign organization has been named, the opposition has yet to do the same.

Bilateral Relations

17. (C) Rangel said that U.S.-Venezuela relationship needed to return to a more normal basis, and that the two countries had lots of work to do together. He asked rhetorically how long Venezuela would have to put up with such things as the USG's recently released Trafficking in Persons Report which singled out Venezuela as a poor performer when there was no reason to think the situation here was any worse than it was in Colombia or Brazil which received better evaluations. He also mentioned the declassification of a DOD report from 2002 which alleged (apparently based on press accounts) that the GOV had been colluding with the FARC. He noted that Venezuelan police had just conducted a massive drug seizure (six tons of cocaine), and said that the GOV wanted to continue cooperation in this area.

18. (C) The Ambassador said that he appreciated counter-narcotics cooperation. In terms of the overall bilateral relationship, President Chavez's evident decision to campaign against President Bush rather than the opposition, and his insulting personal remarks against him were very poorly received in Washington. Rangel said that this is something "that could be discussed." The Ambassador said that there had been consideration of the suggestion that Rangel's chief of staff, Amb. Rene Arreaza, and MFA chief of staff Temir Porras come to Washington for discussions. If the GOV chose to send them, they would be received at appropriately senior levels. Rangel said that, while a final decision had not been made by President Chavez, there was "a good disposition" in this matter. He also said that he was prepared to be helpful if the Ambassador and his staff were having difficulties meeting with appropriate GOV officials.

More on Bilateral Relations

19. (C) Chief of Staff Arreaza later called the Ambassador to say that Rangel had liked the idea of broadening the international observation by inviting the EU and UNDP as well as the OAS and the Carter Center. He added that at a June 13 cabinet meeting (without Chavez) the consensus was that Chavez should stop attacking President Bush personally since these attacks were in fact helping the opposition.

Comment

10. (C) Rangel, who can be caustic and contemptuous, was on his best behavior. (This is the first time that a meeting between him and the Ambassador occurred at his initiative.) He seemed confident that Chavez could win the referendum process, derided the opposition as unprepared, and seemingly looked forward to the perceived opportunity that a Chavez victory in the recall referendum could give to reconstructing U.S.-Venezuelan relations on the GOV's terms -- acceptance of the Bolivarian revolution and all its works.

SHAPIRO

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